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SUBJECT: A TONGA ELECTION PREVIEW

11. (SBU) Summary: Seventy-one candidates are running for the nine seats in Tonga's parliament reserved for People's Representatives (PRs) in the April 23-24 elections. While Tonga law has no provision for candidates to register their political affiliation, at least 30 are associated with the pro-democracy movement. All current PRs in parliament, including pro-democracy leaders 'Akilisi Pohiva and Clive Edwards, are running for re-election. There are eight women candidates. The Tonga Broadcasting Commission has been running election oriented programming in which candidates have been able to voice their views, so long as they do not criticize the current government. End Summary.

Last election under current system

12. (U) With political reforms anticipated in 2010, the upcoming April 23-24 elections should be the last under Tonga's current electoral system. The 33 nobles will elect their nine representatives on April 23, and the rest of country will vote for the nine People's Representatives on April 24.

Political parties and candidates

13. (U) The most populous of Tonga's five electoral districts is the island of Tongatapu, which has almost two thirds of the total population, but is allocated only three of the nine PR seats in parliament. Twenty-eight candidates are competing for these three seats, among them outspoken pro-democracy advocates and current PRs Akilisi Pohiva, running for his 8th term, and Clive Edwards, running for his 2nd term. Four Tongatapu candidates, including all three current PRs, have pending court cases related to the riots of November 2006. One of these candidates, Sangster Saulala, who is charged with sedition, is the former manager of a television station that aired anti-government programs during the public service strike in 2005 and again in the days leading up to the November 2006 riots.

Other noteworthy candidates for Tongatapu include two prominent women pro-democracy advocates, Mele 'Amanaki, General Secretary of the Public Servant's Association, and 'Akanete Lauti, Director of the Human Rights and Pro-Democracy Movement and 2007 IVP participant. Conservative candidates include Mateaki Heimuli, editor of Tonga's government-owned newspaper. The frontrunners for Tongatapu at this stage appear to be the three current representatives and Mele 'Amanaki.

14. (U) Tonga's four smaller electoral districts are the island groups of Vava'u and Ha'apai, each with two seats in parliament, and 'Eua and Niua, each with one seat in parliament. Twenty-two candidates are running for Vava'u's two seats, and nine have

registered for Ha'apai's two seats. One of the two Ha'apai representatives, 'Uliti Uata, has a court case pending related to the November 2006 riots. Uata has been a PR for Ha'apai for most of the past three decades and is a pro-democracy advocate. Also contesting a Ha'apai seat is Teisina Fuko, a former PR and leader of the People's Democratic Party. Five of Ha'apai's candidates are considered conservative and the other four are pro-reform. The 22 Vava'u candidates are almost evenly split between conservatives and pro-reform advocates. Eight candidates are running for the seat in 'Eua. Tonga's only current female PR, Ms. Lepolo Taunisila, is campaigning in Niua, where she faces three opponents. Of the three, one female candidate is a prominent businesswoman, 'Ofa Simiki, who, like Ms Taunisila, has a court case pending in the Supreme Court related to the November 2006 riots. Another Niua candidate is former Cabinet minister Peauafi Haukinima, who was one of the first two PRs appointed by the King as Minister for Agriculture following the 2005 general elections. He resigned from Cabinet in June 2007 after a drunken incident at a royal wedding in Nuku'alofa.

Election issues

15. (U) Tonga's law does not provide for candidates to register themselves as affiliated with particular political parties. However, many candidates are clearly affiliated with certain parties, such as the Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement and the People's Democratic Party. Other candidates are independent. Two candidates told emboff that the majority of candidates have stated their support for the proposed political reforms, an attempt to tap into the public mood for change. The most talked about issues of the campaign are the political reforms, good governance and corruption in government, and the economy.

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TBC allows broadcast of political programs -
with one major caveat

16. (SBU) The Tonga Broadcasting Commission (Radio/TV Tonga) has allowed candidates to broadcast election campaign programs on radio and television, subject to one condition. Candidates have been verbally advised that all election campaign programs must not criticize the government. Presumably, if candidates fail to abide by this rule because if they don't their programs will not be broadcast. Radio Tonga's transmission covers the whole country, and is by far the best way to reach people in the rural areas and remote islands. Television coverage is limited to the two main island groups of Tongatapu and Vava'u. The Ministry of Information has stated that the conditions of broadcasting set down by Radio/TV Tonga shall be considered as having been sanctioned by the Ministry. In November last year, the Minister for Information told the media that his Ministry would draft guidelines for the government-owned media organizations. To date no such guidelines have been issued.

Overseas resident candidates

17. (SBU) Tongan citizens resident overseas are eligible to stand for election, and a few candidates are long-term residents of the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand, including 'Alani Taione, an Auckland-based pro-democracy activist who received a death threat related to his public demonstrations against the King in 2006 in Auckland. So far, the election campaign has been free from interference from authorities apart from the glaring restriction on what can be said on government-owned radio and television.

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